

THE TALE OF TWO OKLAHOMAS: HOW, WHEN, AND WHY  
EASTERN OKLAHOMA WENT RED

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While Oklahoma has safely rested in the Republican camp in presidential elections since 1968, Eastern Oklahoma has often been an area of Democratic strength. However, recent Democratic contenders have often found this part of the state to be less supportive than in the past. What factors in Eastern Oklahoma led to this delayed realignment? Does it continue to differ from the rest of the state? To answer these questions, we collected presidential election data on all Oklahoma counties from 2000, 2008, and 2012, as well as demographic information for each county (including the percentage of African Americans and Native Americans, population density, percentage of Evangelicals, and income). There is a significant decline in Democratic support leading up to the 2008 election. This decay is independent of the demographic controls and leads us to question whether Eastern Oklahoma is still a distinct region in terms of partisanship.

## INTRODUCTION

Oklahoma, more specifically Eastern Oklahoma,<sup>1</sup> has historically been an outlier from the traditional Southern political bloc. This dissimilarity was partially because of the state's unique founding and late entrance into the union, which did not occur until 1907. This lag excluded Oklahoma from the act of secession and accession to the Confederacy, though some of the tribes in Eastern Oklahoma (Indian Territory) still sided with the South during the Civil War. During the last 50 years, political realignment has been drastic in the South; Oklahoma seemed to follow this trend especially at the presidential level. In fact, only Arizona has surpassed Oklahoma's record of supporting the Republican nominee in the last twelve presidential elections.

Eastern Oklahoma, however, seemed to trail both the state and the rest of the region in making this switch. As late as 2004, the Eastern part of Oklahoma was considered a region that was competitive for Democratic candidates running for office at all levels. Al Gore lost the state's second congressional district by only five points in 2000 but won less than 40 percent of the two-party vote in the remainder of state. The Cook Partisan Voting Index for the district in 2004 was +3 Republican while the other districts ranged from +12 Republican to +16 Republican. By 2012, the district had swung back to being a safe Republican house seat and the Cook PVI had jumped to 20 percent, which was close to the state average. What had happened in this region during that decade of time?

To answer this question, we examine several reasons why Eastern Oklahoma didn't politically realign at the same time as the rest of the state. These factors differ from the academically supported explanations that explain how the other Southern states and the rest of the Oklahoma realigned before 2000. The indicators that we examine in this article will help to clarify why the two realignments did not occur simultaneously. We controlled for a number of demographic factors but also demonstrate that there was a negative Barak Obama effect,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, we define "Eastern Oklahoma" as including the following 23 counties: Adair, Atoka, Bryan, Cherokee, Choctaw, Craig, Delaware, Haskell, Latimer, Le Flore, Mayes, McCurtain, McIntosh, Muskogee, Nowata, Okmulgee, Ottawa, Pittsburg, Pushmata, Rogers, Sequoyah, Wagoner, and Washington.

mostly in the period prior to his 2012 re-election. As we will show, Eastern Oklahoma still remained a distinctly pro-Democratic region compared to the rest of the state up until 2008. When demographic factors were accounted for in the 2012 election, the partisan advantage diminished and Obama ran at the same level in Eastern Oklahoma as he did in the remainder of the state.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To better explain this delayed alignment phenomenon, it is important to examine a variety of sources that address the topic of political realignment, especially in the South<sup>2</sup>. However, a majority of studies that address the realignment of the Deep South neglect to include this area, most likely due to Eastern Oklahoma's dissimilarities and lack of historical association with the "Deep South." However, scholarly works have illuminated these differences when explaining how the Southern states have become conservative strongholds, and the vast wealth of literature on this subject may hold some clues to the delayed realignment within Eastern Oklahoma from the Democratic to Republican parties.

Many academics have concluded that the Deep South realigned due to political white flight after feeling alienated by the Democratic Party during the Civil Rights Movement. Valentino and Sears concluded that race was the central factor in the change of partisanship to the Republican Party during the Civil Rights Era (Valentino 2005, 687). Articles, such as this one, only examine the former Confederate states, which would neglect Oklahoma.

In *New Politics of the Old South*, Green (2013, 24) claims that the Republican Party was successfully able to portray the Democratic Party as the party that was only concerned with advancing the concerns of ethnic and racial minorities. This strategy has contributed to Southern

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<sup>2</sup> There have been a number of excellent studies on the topic of race and realignment in the South including, but not limited to, Abramowitz and Saunders (1998), Shafer and Johnston (2009), Stanley (1988) and Valentino and Sears (2005), which offer variety of explanations as to the causes of this realignment.

white voters drifting away from the Democratic Party. This is yet another indication that the Southern states reversed their partisan voting trends in response to, just as Lyndon Johnson had predicted (Green 2013, 270), the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This Act would conclude that the South's change was heavily due to racial factors. Although Oklahoma has a similar white population to the Deep South; the Sooner state does not fall under this Southern umbrella. This electoral shift was further delayed due to the fact that racial tensions in Oklahoma were not as severe as they were in the traditionally Southern states (Gaddie 2007, 239).

Other academics such as Gaddie (2010) focus specifically on Oklahoma. Gaddie concluded that the issues on the minds of voters in this state are not of "poverty of the pocketbook so much as the poverty of leadership, values, and the soul," (Gaddie 2010, 241). In other words, these voters are not concerned with financial variables as much as the content of the character and the values to which they hold for themselves. Gaddie also notes in his conclusion that white Evangelicals make up an incredibly significant proportion of the electorate and that their vote has become more and more of a bloc. He argues that political ideology and church attendance are very much related (Gaddie 2010, 233). Gaddie claims that if the Republicans can unite the Evangelicals and include them within their base, they can essentially count their eggs before they hatch in this rural state (Gaddie 2010, 241).

Mason, Schmaltz, and Wohlers (2008) discuss the importance of religion within the realm of Oklahoma politics. The authors claim that a publication of religious affiliation encouraged its subscribers to actively pursue their faith through a plethora of conservative issues such as publically supporting anti-abortion measures as well as home-schooling policies and court decisions (Mason, Schmaltz, and Wohlers 2008, 26). This type of politically conservative activism within the religious population would boost support for the Republican Party. In fact, this would make religious values a catalyst of change to realign the state with the Republican Party who had managed to accommodate this group of religious individuals.

Savage, Min, and Aman (2011) focus on Eastern Oklahoma. They conclude that a strain of populism within this part of Oklahoma is what caused the delay in their political realignment. Furthermore, the authors note that Democrats in Eastern Oklahoma tend to be more accepting

of racial diversity than the rest of the South (Savage, Min, and Aman 2011, 15). The indifference towards race and cluster of populists who wish the government to be involved with both social issues and fiscal issues is what allowed the Eastern part of Oklahoma to stay under the control of the Democrats. This specific study, however, is inconclusive due to its insignificant sample size.

It is important to notice the dissimilarities between the content of the realignment analyses between those of the Deep South, those of Eastern Oklahoma and Oklahoma in its entirety. The main differentiation is that the Deep South - according to these sources - is argued to have changed partisanship due to racial relations and policies related to race, while Oklahoma did not; according to these sources, Oklahoma - and more specifically, Eastern Oklahoma - changed partisanship due to its religious composition.

## HYPOTHESES

Years after the political realignment of the American South, Eastern Oklahoma may be following the trend. This process for the Eastern portion of the state seemed to be finalized in 2012 when the second congressional district (a district that is within the Eastern portion of the state) elected a Republican congressman. This change came far too delayed to be the product of racial tension and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; this realignment was due primarily to the strong connection between the Evangelical faith and the policies and issues that the Republican Party support and advocate. This shift came much earlier for the state as a whole, this is visible in the results of the presidential elections. Oklahoma became a Republican stronghold at the presidential level in the election of 2000 due to the Western portion realigning at this point. With this in mind, we can formulate a number of formal hypotheses.

Formal Hypotheses:

- **H1:** If a county is part of Eastern Oklahoma, the level of support for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.

- **H2:** The greater the proportion of the population that is Native American, the level of support in that county for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.
- **H3:** The greater the proportion of the population that is African American, the level of support in that county for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.
- **H4:** The greater the population density, the level of support in that county for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.
- **H5:** The greater the average income, the level of support in that county for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.
- **H6:** The greater the proportion of the population that is Evangelical, the level of support in that county for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.
- **H7:** The greater the proportion of the population that voted for Al Gore in 2000, the level of support in that county for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.
- **H8:** The greater the proportion of the population that voted for Barack Obama in 2008, the level of support in that county for Democratic presidential nominees should be higher.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

We ran three OLS (ordinary least squares) regression models to measure the relative performance of the Democratic presidential nominees in Oklahoma general elections from 2000-2012. We selected this measure since these elections had been competitive nationwide during this period. Furthermore, no presidential or vice-presidential candidate had a residence within the state, unlike in statewide races, where home county advantages of senatorial or gubernatorial candidates may have distorted the county-wide results. Since we are measuring data at the county-level we have 77 cases, one representing each county in Oklahoma.

The dependent variable in the first model (represented in Table 1), which measured change in presidential vote support from 2000-2012, and the third model (represented in Table 3), which measured change

in presidential vote support from 2008-2012, was the percentage of the presidential general election vote that Obama in 2012 received in a particular county. The dependent variable in the second model (represented in Table 2), which measured change in presidential vote support from 2000-2008, was the percentage of the presidential general election vote that Obama received in 2008 in a particular county. In all three of the models, the dependent variable was coded to represent the percentage of the two-party presidential vote in each county received by the Democratic nominee.

The key factor we were examining in this article was how patterns of Democratic support had changed in Eastern Oklahoma compared to the rest of the state. To measure this outcome, Eastern counties were noted in the models by the creation of a dichotomous independent variable labeled “East.” Eastern counties were coded as “1” and the other counties received a “0.”

The next step was to create a series of other independent variables that would control for demographic factors for each county. The percentage of a county’s population that was African American was included as a variable; this is noted by “African American” in the three models. The Native American population percentage for each county was represented by a “Native American” indicator in the models. Additionally, the Evangelical population proportion was included and was noted as “Evangelical” in the models. We controlled for income by creating an independent variable “Income” that measured per capita income for each county. Furthermore, the population density of each county, i.e., the number of people per square mile, is included; this is noted by “Pop. Density” indicator that is present in the models.

To measure for change over time, we accounted for two variables that would account for trends within the electorate. The percentage of two-party vote in each county that Al Gore received in the 2000 presidential election was noted as “Gore Percent” and used in the models in Table 1 (which measure countywide changes in the Democratic presidential vote total from 2000-2012) and Table 2 (which measure countywide changes in the Democratic presidential vote total from 2000-2008). To account for decays in support specific to the time period 2008-2012, Obama’s percentage of the vote for each county in the 2008

presidential election was also used in one of the models; this value was noted as “Obama 08 Percent” in Table 3.

**Table 1**  
**Change in Democratic Presidential Vote in Oklahoma, 2000-2012**

	<b>Slope</b>	<b>T-Ratio</b>	<b>Beta</b>
East	-.027	-2.493*	-.164
African American	.288	2.231*	.136
Native American	.227	3.267*	.237
Evangelical	-.069	-2.613*	-.157
Income	-.007	-.921	-.091
Pop. Density	.000	4.4435*	.277
Gore Percent	.569	9.704*	.721
Constant	.08	1.549	

R<sup>2</sup>=.799  
Adj. R<sup>2</sup>=.818  
\*p>.05 (two-tailed test)  
N=77

Notes: The dependent variable=the percentage of the two-party presidential vote in each county received by the Democratic nominee; East=counties included in the Eastern portion of the state (1 was entered for these counties, 0 for counties not included); African American=percent of African Americans living in a county; Native American=percent of Native Americans living in a county; Evangelical=percent of Evangelical religious adherents living in a county; Income=average household income in a given county; Pop. Density=population density for a given county.

In Table 1 (i.e., the model measuring the difference in the Democratic presidential vote share from 2000 to 2012), we find that Democratic support in Eastern Oklahoma counties for Obama dropped drastically more than the rest of the state when ethnicity and other demographic factors were accounted for in the model. Other factors that may have helped the Democratic candidate in the Eastern part of the state were mixed. Higher levels of Native American population, which are often correlated with this region, did mean a stronger finish for Obama. However, Obama also did worse in 2012 compared to Gore in rural counties and areas with higher Evangelical populations, both of which findings are consistent with national exit poll results. Obama also did better in areas with traditionally high records of Democratic support, as



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evidenced by the Gore Percent variable, and areas with higher African American populations. As shown by the adjusted r square statistic, the model accounts for nearly 80 percent of the variation in Obama’s 2012 election results among Oklahoma counties.

The next question is when did most of this drop-off in Democratic support occur? Was it mostly because of retrospective reactions to the administration’s policies and performance? Or was there initial resistance in 2008 to Obama’s candidacy that never faded?

**Table 2**  
**Change in Democratic Presidential Vote in Oklahoma, 2000-2008**

	<b>Slope</b>	<b>T-Ratio</b>	<b>Beta</b>
East	-.041	-1.835*	-.164
African American	.069	.261*	.136
Native American	.09	.632	.237
Evangelical	-.063	-1.159	-.157
Income	-.0008	-.016	-.021
Pop. Density	.000	2.073*	.277
Gore Percent	.569	7.055*	.721
Constant	.846	-.087	

R<sup>2</sup>=.590  
Adj. R<sup>2</sup>=.549  
\*p>.054 (two-tailed test)  
N=77

Notes: The dependent variable=the percentage of the two-party presidential vote in each county received by the Democratic nominee; East=counties included in the Eastern portion of the state (1 was entered for these counties, 0 for counties not included); African American=percent of African Americans living in a county; Native American=percent of Native Americans living in a county; Evangelical=percent of Evangelical religious adherents living in a county; Income=average household income in a given county; Pop. Density=population density for a given county.

In Table 2 (i.e., the model measuring the difference in the Democratic presidential vote share from 2000 to 2008), we find a strong decline in Obama’s 2008 finish in Eastern Oklahoma when compared to Gore’s 2000 results. Outside of an African-American bump for Obama and a

drop-off in rural support, no other factor explains the decline once Gore's 2000 results are accounted for in the model.

**Table 3**  
**Change in Democratic Presidential Vote in Oklahoma, 2008-2012**

	<b>Slope</b>	<b>T-Ratio</b>	<b>Beta</b>
East	.002	.188	.014
African American	.341	2.198*	.16
Native American	.286	3.463*	.298
Evangelical	-.033	-1.059	-.076
Income	-.02	-2.278*	-.190
Pop. Density	.00009	2.590*	.199
Obama 08 Percent	.357	6.619*	4.87
Constant	.221	3.956*	

R<sup>2</sup>=.737  
Adj. R<sup>2</sup>=.710  
\*p>.05 (two-tailed test)  
N=77

Notes: The dependent variable=the percentage of the two-party presidential vote in each county received by the Democratic nominee; East=counties included in the Eastern portion of the state (1 was entered for these counties, 0 for counties not included); African American=percent of African Americans living in a county; Native American=percent of Native Americans living in a county; Evangelical=percent of Evangelical religious adherents living in a county; Income=average household income in a given county; Pop. Density=population density for a given county.

In Table 3 (i.e., the model measuring the difference in the Democratic presidential vote share from 2008 to 2012), however, Obama's 2012 finish in Eastern Oklahoma actually suggests a rebound relative to the state where the Republican margin of victory grew slightly, though the relationship is not statistically significant. These findings suggest that the drop in Eastern Oklahoma's Democratic support was primarily based on factors prior to Obama taking office. Obama also continued to do worse in counties with smaller African-American and Native-American populations and as well as in the more affluent counties and the more rural areas of the state.

African-American support remained positively correlated with strong Obama results in all three models, and population density was positively correlated. However none of the other independent variables maintained that level of consistency. Income was the only variable that remained statistically insignificant in both Tables 1 and 2 – a trend that changes in Table 3. Here, income turned out to be one of the few indicators that were significant. Native American support was significant in Tables 1 and 3 but not in Table 2. Evangelical support was significant in the first model but neither of the others. The variable representing per capita income was only significant in Table 3.

This disparity suggests that the decline in Democratic fortunes across the state as a whole is nuanced, multi-staged and complicated. The data in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that some of the statewide changes in patterns of Democratic support can be traced to other demographic variables we included as well. As evidenced by Table 2, Obama in 2008 suffered less of a drop relative to Gore in counties with higher levels of African-American residents. Tables 1 and 3 suggest the variations in income and Evangelical population, two common suspects in the decline of Democratic vote totals in red states, have little effect on Obama's poor performance in Oklahoma's 2008 and 2012 presidential contests.

Our findings indicate strong support for the second (i.e., Democratic presidential support has remained relatively strong in counties with larger Native American populations), third (i.e., Democratic presidential support has remained relatively strong in counties with larger African American populations) and fourth (i.e., Democratic presidential support has remained relatively strong in counties with higher population density) hypotheses, though in most cases these findings mean that the drop-off in the Democratic vote percentage has just been smaller than in other counties. The seventh and eighth hypotheses, representing control variables for Democratic performance in recent races, were also supported and meant that the relative levels of Democratic support were somewhat stable over time. The results for the fifth and sixth hypothesis, representing counties were higher levels of income and evangelical support, were somewhat mixed but suggested a continued erosion of support for Democratic presidential candidates over the last decade.

Having taken these various demographic controls into account, it is important to note that our first hypothesis was incorrect. Democratic support in Eastern Oklahoma has eroded at a faster rate than in the remainder of the state when these demographic factors are taken into account. While specification error is always a concern, we do believe that our models give us an accurate set of snapshots in why and how Oklahoma presidential politics have changed in recent years. As evidenced by the adjusted r squares,<sup>3</sup> the three models all offer fairly accurate and parsimonious explanations of why Democratic support dropped during the 21<sup>st</sup> century – both in Eastern Oklahoma and outside of it.

## CONCLUSION

Remarkably Eastern Oklahoma still remained an island of relative Democratic strength in the state until 2008. While the party's candidates did not win every election, they were competitive when compared to the party's showing in other regions. Gore won nine counties in Eastern Oklahoma and was competitive in much of the region.

It is important to note this regional advantage had evaporated well before the 2012 elections. Still, Obama ran no better by that point there than he did in the rest of the state when the relevant demographic and political factors are accounted for in our model. A significant portion of this change in Eastern Oklahoma seems to have happened independent of the demographics factors that may have hampered Obama nationally such as poor showings among rural or religious voters. The year 2016 will be a test of whether this result is an aberration or whether there are no longer “two Oklahomas” in the state's electoral politics at the presidential level.

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<sup>3</sup> The adjusted r square values ranged from .55 for model two to .80 for model three.

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